

Best Practices in Spelling Instruction

Heather Rader

My fascination with spelling is personal and professional. My oldest two kids with similar DNA and educational experiences are very different spellers. My son needs to look at a word once and he's got it. My daughter has to use pictures, rhymes, chants, dances and repetition, and even then spelling is still very difficult for her. He was the spelling bee winner for his school; she's had an electronic spelling dictionary in her backpack since third grade. Neither experience of my children is better or worse than the other, but they are diverse.

In my work with teachers, I've heard everything from "I do the Monday pre-test and the Friday spelling test. It worked for me and it's what kids today need," to "I don't teach spelling at all because I don't want it to inhibit children's ideas." Yet both groups of teachers will lament, "Their spelling in writing is atrocious!" Why would such a difference in instructional approaches yield the same results? And, more importantly, what does work?

S. Rebecca Leigh put her spin on a poster titled "**Unlucky Arithmetic: Thirteen Ways to Raise a Nonreader**" by Dean Schneider and Robin Smith when she wrote this article for Choice Literacy, **Unlucky Lists: Raising Non-Writers and Non-Artists**. Continuing in the manner of Dean, Robin and Rebecca, I submit my unlucky list for raising non-spellers.

Raising Non-Spellers

1. Ask children to spell words they don't use. Words like *mush* and *steady*, which are actual third grade spelling words from a reading program's recent list.
2. Expect students to learn to spell words that interest them on their own time.
3. Hand young students a big dictionary when they ask you how to spell.
4. Give kids more than ten new words a week, and then only repeat words on a review list once every six weeks.
5. Send most of your spelling instruction home as homework.
6. Once students move into the intermediate grades, keep asking them to "sound it out" as the main strategy for spelling words.
7. Tell students using spell check is cheating.
8. Call students "bad spellers" or "struggling learners."
9. Give feedback by marking all the misspelled words in their writing -- writing in pen on top of the way they've spelled the words with your corrections.
10. Assume spellers learn just as you did, so make sure your spelling instruction is almost entirely in the auditory mode and only during whole group instruction.
11. Tell students that "English doesn't make any sense," instead of looking for patterns or teaching rules that work in many words.

12. Have students write the target words five times each in different colors.

13. Judge a writer, small or large, by their spelling.

Now before you start feeling guilty because one or more of these "rules" describes your past or current instruction, hang on. Me too. In order to have fidelity to a reading program adoption as a young teacher, I gave 20 new words a week to my third graders in the traditional manner I thought was expected of me. What my spellers learned that year must have been a side effect of my teaching, not the direct result of it. Now that I know differently, I move on. As my friend and colleague Cristina Charney says, "If not that, then what?" Based on research and practices in the classrooms I work in, here are some big ideas in spelling to consider.

Every spelling word is not created equal. According to Patricia Cunningham, author of [What Really Matters in Spelling: Research-Based Strategies and Activities](#), "Making wise decisions about which words to include on your wall is critical." The first patterns to consider are the *onsets* (the beginning consonants), blends (like *bl*) and digraphs (*ch* represents two letters that make one sound). The second patterns to consider are the *rimes*, which begin at the vowel and go to the end of the word, like *ork*.

Young spellers should have experience with a variety of increasingly difficult onset and rime patterns and use those patterns to spell a variety of words. A spelling word like *strike* has the onset of *str* and the rime of *ike*, which would enable spellers to spell *street* and *strip* as well as *trike* and *bike*. The single spelling word *strike* taught well, should enable a writer to spell related words. Students need to have the Amazon.com mindset as in "Because you bought this book, you might also like . . ." Except with spelling, it's "Because you spelled this word, you can also spell . . ."

However, not all words can be spelled according to patterns. Those common or high frequency words like *though* and *because* need to be studied as well. Most educators agree that spelling lists should be thoughtfully composed of words with intentional spelling patterns, common words that don't follow patterns, and words that students want to use in their writing.

Choose fewer words. Brain research tells us this in many ways. We learn new words better by associating them with words we already know. We also learn better by chunking information into the right-sized chunks. We have phone numbers like 867-5309 for a reason. Cunningham advises, "Add words gradually, no more than five each week." The reason why we lost the ability to spell our 20 word lists by the next week? Too many words! They stayed in our short-term memory for the Friday test, but never made it into our store of working words that we use for writing.

Use all modes of learning in spelling instruction. Read the words slowly and listen to the sounds for the auditory learners. Notice the shapes of the letters and associate a picture for the visual learners. Trace the onsets and rimes in the air. Clap the syllables. Sing and chant the letters. R-E-S-P-E-C-T! Your kinesthetic learners will thank you.

Teach multiple strategies in spelling. "Sound it out" is a strategy for spelling that works for some primary spellers. But like counting on your fingers in math, it needs to be depended on less and less over time. True word learning is about patterns. For words without recognizable patterns, repetition of using words in writing is key. In many classrooms there are anchor charts and bulletin boards of reading strategies that teach readers the questions to ask themselves as they puzzle over words. What are questions that good spellers ask themselves?

1. *Which one looks right?* Having students learn to write words two or three different times helps them develop the skill that strong adult spellers possess. I asked my seven-year-old to spell gasoline and she wrote *gasulen*, *gaslen*, *gasulean*. She then circled the last spelling and said, "That looks the most right." And in fact she's only missed *u* for *o* and *a* for *i* with a reordering at the end.

2. *How many syllables does the word have?* Knowing this helps a speller think about different chunks and where the vowels may be placed.

3. *Are there any other smaller words inside that I know?* Many multisyllabic words have smaller words inside of them that are easy for young spellers to recognize.

4. *Which parts might be tricky?* Knowing the roadblocks of spellers is important. What makes spelling difficult? Vowel teams. Is it *ee* or *ea* or *e* with a silent *e* at the end that makes the *e* say its name? Homonyms? Foreign words? Silent letters? Keep a list going that students can talk about the difficulties and learn to anticipate them.

5. *Which tools will help?* Asking someone next to you how to spell a word is a good tool. Looking up at a word wall or around the room can be a great support. Using spell check or dictionary.com is fantastic. Leaving a blank line and coming back to the word later is also a tool I use as an adult writer. Depending on the age of your writer, having awareness of tools is very important.

My daughter who has always struggled with spelling is now in middle school. Since most of her writing happens on the computer and she knows how to use her spelling tools, her challenges are mostly invisible. She's been blessed with teachers that haven't judged the quality of her writing by her spelling. Brilliance exists under every mistake.

I, myself, was always recognized . . . as the "slow one" in the family. It was quite true, and I knew it and accepted it. Writing and spelling were always terribly difficult for me. My letters were without originality. I was . . . an extraordinarily bad speller and have remained so until this day. Agatha Christie



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